

a girl is the strongest thing you can be by dustingspace

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Summary:

She thinks about the Demogorgon and the MindFlayer and part of her wonders if she's the same girl now that she was when she defeated them. People don't treat her like she is.

a girl is the strongest thing you can be

I.

El knows she has a lot of growing up to do. They all do, and she feels like – sometimes – adults overwhelm her when they spit it in her face.

(Not just the adults, she has to remind herself)

Hopper tells her she's too young to be going out at night with all the boys (and Max, she has to remind him – although it doesn't make much of a difference) to rummage in the junkyard for a prop for their next campaign. He tells her that she's still so young and she has weeks and months and years to do all of the things she wants to do and that she shouldn't try to be doing everything *now* or else she'll run out of things to do and be bored forever.

I'm not stupid, El thinks, retreating to her room for the night after losing that battle, I know you're just scared of losing me.

It feels like everyone is scared of losing her, and the weight of her own value starts to hang on her like a bag of bricks. Everyone seems to care so much about her, but – I'm just me, she thinks, looking at her reflection as she wipes the sleep from her eyes and twists the knob on the sink. I'm just El.

I do the same things everyone else does; I read and watch TV and play Dungeons and Dragons and I hang out with my friends when I'm allowed to.

The thing that makes her special – her powers – is just a thing that makes her special. Everyone has one; Mike is a great DM, Dustin is good at video games (Max is better, but El would say her specialty is skateboarding), Will draws beautifully, and Lucas is by *far* the most academically inclined (it shows in school and in their strategy games, and was agreed upon when the party named him the most valuable D&D player of the year).

She just has her powers. It's just her *thing*, it doesn't make her fragile

(which she remembers means needing to be handled with *extreme* care from when she had to unpack boxes with Hopper).

El sticks her toothbrush in her mouth and scrubs a bit harder than usual.

II.

It's hard to deal with the fact that everyone treats you like precious cargo, but it's even harder to deal with *months later* when all of your friends are still treating you like you're ten years younger than them.

An infant.

Mike sucks air in, hard, whenever she looks like she might fall. He's done more than enough to keep her from learning how to ride his bike, and Hopper won't even *consider* buying her one. The closest she feels like she's gotten to doing anything risky lately is stepping on Max's skateboard for a mere second before Mike begged her to get off for fear of her skinning her knee or breaking her leg or somehow finding a way to *die on it*.

In a way, El gets it. She has to get it. She freaks out and panics when she sees Mike's scabs after a rough day in the woods, or when she sees the blisters on his hands after he spends *hours* writing out new campaign materials. She hates seeing him hurt – but she doesn't keep it from happening.

Mike checks on her constantly, opens every door, touches her like he's afraid she might shatter. Dustin, Lucas, and Will aren't as bad with her – but they still share looks when she asks if she can have a turn trying something risky or if she can help move around sheets of metal in the junkyard. Max is the best out of all of them; but still, she cringes when El stumbles in the *slightest*.

El can't say she hates the way that Mike looks at her; softly, gently, with so much love that she feels like she's going to melt. But sometimes she wishes he would crush her in a hug and hold her like he isn't scared of breaking her.

She's been touched so softly and gently for months now that part of

her *wants* to just skin a knee or get a papercut or *something*. She wants danger, she wants risk, she wants to not be looked at like she's paper thin and flimsy and – a *baby*.

(The other part of her has to consider the fact that if she were to get hurt, in any way, shape, or form, she'd have to see Mike become distraught and sick with worry and Hopper would probably have an anxiety attack and Mrs. Byers would probably *cry*)

Sometimes, El thinks about the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer and part of her wonders if she's the same girl now that she was when she defeated them.

People don't treat her like she is.

They don't treat her like she's half of who she used to be.

They treat her like she's weak; and suddenly, El starts to believe it.

III.

“Jane, you've got to get out of bed.” Hopper says, standing in the doorway of her bedroom. El's awake, facing the wall, her eyes squeezed shut. She tries to even her breathing like she's really sleeping, but she hears Hopper step into the room and she knows that as soon as he touches her, she's going to mess up.

Hopper crosses the room and presses a hand to her shoulder, shaking her gently. “Nancy's coming by soon to tutor you. You've got to wake up.”

“No.” El manages, opening her eyes to stare at the wall. Hopper pulls his hand away, and she hears the fabric of his shirt wrinkle as he crosses his arms.

“No, huh?” He asks, and she nods against her pillow. He sighs. “I made you breakfast. Eggos and eggs.”

“I don't want it.”

“Why's that?” Hopper asks, and El sits up and turns to face him. He furrows his brow when he sees her face; empty, devoid of emotion.

Something he hasn't seen – probably ever.

"Jane?" He frowns, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "What's wrong?"

Enter worried father mode, she thinks, and turns her attention toward a loose thread on her blanket, wishing he would just – leave.

"Jane?" Hopper asks, expecting an answer. She keeps her jaw set, mouth shut. He won't get one.

"Did I do something wrong? Did I – upset you? Make you angry? Because I can't fix it if you won't tell me what I did." Hopper starts, sighing. She sees him take off his hat and set it on the bed out of the corner of her eye. "I can't possibly imagine what I could have done. It's nine in the morning."

"Go." She manages, and lays back down in bed, turning toward the wall. She yanks the covers up, and over her head.

She forces the door to slam back against the wall, and she flips his hat off the bed and into the doorway.

It feels like an eternity before he finally stands.

"I have to go to work. When Nancy comes – let her in, okay? And you can use the microwave for your breakfast."

Hopper crosses the room, picks up his hat; she hears her bedroom door shut; and then the front door a moment later.

She can't help it -- she turns, buries her face into her pillow, and screams.

IV.

Nancy tries to pretend like she doesn't think anything is wrong, but Hopper called her once he got to the station and when she sees El – yeah, she knows something is up.

Nancy's been tutoring El since winter break on different subjects, trying desperately to catch her up so she can enter the ninth grade in

the fall. It's hard, because El is lacking so many critical foundations – but what she lacks in knowledge she makes up for in enthusiasm, and at the rate they're currently going (in April, they have four months left – with tutoring every day, Monday through Saturday) Nancy is sure she'll be able to pass the tests she has to take in the beginning of August to determine if she's ready or not.

Nancy's been around El enough (almost every day for four months? Yeah, she knows El like the back of her hand) to know she isn't okay. And that whatever's wrong has been building up and up and up until it finally broke her down.

And Nancy is worried.

"Hey." Nancy starts, pausing to press her lips together, wonder if she really wants to ask – and then, "Are you alright, El?"

El turns to look at Nancy and frowns, nodding.

Nancy glares down at the math paper they're working on and then says, "Are we friends?"

When she looks up to meet El's gaze again, El softens. She nods again.

"You know that thing Mike says? Friends don't lie?"

El pauses, and Nancy can see her swallow. El looks away for a moment, and then turns back to Nancy. Unexpectedly, she says: "Do you think I'm weak?"

Nancy raises her eyebrows and then grins, shaking her head. "No, El, I think you're the strongest person I know. Probably the strongest person in – Hawkins. Indiana. The world? Maybe the world."

El turns to look down at her paper, and she stutters out, "F-Friends don't lie."

"I'm not lying." Nancy replies, reaching a hand out to touch El's wrist (softly, El thinks, biting down hard on the inside of her cheek), "I can't believe you'd even ask me that. You're not weak, El. Not at all."

El pulls her wrist away and hides her hands under the table. She glares down at the table, wishing she could be anywhere but here. This table. This cabin. This town, this state, anywhere but here.

"Did the boys say something to you?" Nancy asks, quietly.

"No." El replies, looking up. "No. Well – *no*."

And then it comes out like a dam bursting, and El sputters: "I feel – mad. I feel like everyone thinks I'm stupid and weak and a baby. Like I'm going to break if they touch me or if I fall off a bike or trip over a curb or – anything. I – I'm not – *weak*. You said it. I'm not weak. But if I'm not a big baby, then *why* is everyone always treating me like one!" El cries out, slamming her fists against the table.

The whole cabin shakes with the force of it; Nancy doesn't even flinch.

El presses her face into her arms on the table – she doesn't cry. She won't cry. Not today. Not during *this* conversation.

And then she realizes she's weak and – screw it, if she's weak – then – *then* –

El collapses into a fit of sobs. Nancy stands and quickly wraps her arms around El's shoulders, hugging her and pulling her away from her arms. Nancy crouches down next to her chair and tries to calm her down, but the frustration has finally gotten to her and El just can't stop *crying*.

"Oh – oh, god. Oh, El, *no* – you're not weak. You're not weak, you're not a baby, and – I'm so sorry." Nancy rambles, trying to wipe El's tears away.

"Stop it!" El cries out, shoving Nancy's hands away. "You're doing it, too."

"No, I'm not." Nancy replies, wrapping her fingers around El's hands and forcing them away from her face. El heaves with sobs, and Nancy shakes her head. "I'm not treating you like a baby, not right now. I'm trying to help."

“You’re being – too – *gentle* –“ El whispers, and Nancy rolls her eyes.

“You’re *crying*, of course I’m going to be gentle with you.” Nancy replies, holding El’s hands. “Calm down. It’s okay. I understand why you’re upset.”

“After everything that happened – El, of course they’re going to worry about you. That’s part of the reason why they treat you like that. Hopper, Mrs. Byers, Will, Lucas, Dustin, Max, Jonathan – *Mike* – *all of us* are just worried about you.” Nancy assures her, stroking the backs of her hands with her thumbs, “They know you’re strong. We all know you’re strong. A *weak* person wouldn’t have survived like you did. You are strong.”

“You’re just saying that –” El mutters, and Nancy shakes her head.

“No, I’m not. We all look to you for strength, El, you’re – you’re honestly – my *role model*. I wish I was half the person you have managed to be.” Nancy gushes, and El turns bright red. Nancy stands up and takes her seat at the table again.

El wipes away the last of her tears, and takes a shuddering breath.

“Life – sucks sometimes. People suck sometimes. You’ll be looked down on a lot, and for a lot of different reasons. Right now, people will look down on you because they’re worried about you for everything you’ve gone through. Then they’ll look down on you because you’re young, and – so many people think young people don’t know what they’re doing.” Nancy says, rolling her eyes with a huff, before adding, “And finally, some people will look down on you because you’re a girl. But a girl is the strongest thing you can be. And you’re incredibly strong and not just because you’re a girl. That makes you – like – superwoman.”

Nancy pauses, and looks down at the math worksheet. “When anyone tries to treat you like you can’t do something, the only thing you can do to change their mind is to do it. Don’t let them get you down or stop you from doing something, okay?” Nancy says, offering a grin. “It sucks. You shouldn’t have to prove anyone wrong, but you should, you can, and I know that you will.”

El stares at Nancy for a moment before standing and wrapping her arms tightly around Nancy. Nancy embraces El in the hug, squeezing her back just as hard as El squeezed her.

“Thank you, Nancy.”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s keep kicking ass, okay?” Nancy says, tapping her pencil against the worksheet.

“Okay.”

“So. Have you been working on those algebra equations?”

V.

It's June.

The sun is beating down on them, and none of them are wearing sunscreen. El's face is turning red, and she can see Mike's freckles better now than she could in the winter or the spring.

When she stares at them for too long, he wiggles his nose and it makes her laugh.

Max lets her ride her skateboard in the arcade parking lot, and even sometimes down the street. El nearly falls off as it zooms down the slight slant in Lucas's driveway, heading into the street. El stops it before hitting a bush, and when she turns around, Mike gives her a thumbs-up.

El grins, grabs the skateboard and runs up the driveway to go again.

Author's Note:

and that's my first fic on here -- or anywhere, really -- so if you liked it then you can kudos or comment or fav or whatever you want, and if you /didn't/ then give me some criticism!!! thank you for reading my loves